

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 4 June 2025
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 22 in F Op. 54 (1804)

I. In tempo d'un menuetto • II. Allegretto – Più allegro

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 'Appassionata' (1804-5)

I. Allegro assai • II. Andante con moto •

III. Allegro ma non troppo – Presto

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 13 in E flat Op. 27 No. 1 'Quasi una fantasia' (1801)

I. Andante • II. Allegro molto e vivace •

III. Adagio con espressione • IV. Allegro vivace

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)

I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo •

II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo –

Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo



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In 1804, Ludwig van Beethoven was in the middle of the most productive period of his life, one that music historians have labelled his 'heroic' era. That year, he completed his third symphony (the 'Eroica') and the Triple Concerto, began composing his opera *Leonore*, and worked on three extraordinary piano sonatas, two of which feature in tonight's concert.

Hot on the heels of the famous 'Waldstein' sonata came the **Sonata in F Op. 54**. It is a curious, experimental work that dispenses with the first two movements of a typical sonata, plunging straight into a menuetto – but a very strange one. What begins as an elegant dance suddenly gives way to a bombastic trio, with swirling triplets in octaves and sixths, before settling down and repeating the menuetto theme with embellishments. After a shorter reprisal of the trio theme, the menuetto returns once again. The *Allegretto* that follows is in *perpetuum mobile*, its unrelenting semiquavers a mask for much wit and humour.

Perhaps no sonata has been more associated with the tempestuous side of Beethoven's character than the **Sonata in F minor Op. 57, 'Appassionata'**. It is a bold work of great extremes, not least because its opening movement features what was then the lowest note on Beethoven's piano, low F. From this ominous, quiet beginning come a whole series of turbulent shifts in dynamic, mood and key that make full use of the expanded range of the piano. The following *Andante con moto* is a set of four variations on a chordal theme; the last variation ends on an unresolved diminished seventh chord that leads directly into the finale, where the chord is emphatically repeated 13 times before it finally resolves. In this extraordinarily powerful movement, a landmark of the piano literature, a repeated semiquaver motif blossoms into a whirlwind of great intensity. Much of its energy, however, is held back until the final *Presto* coda, where it is unleashed with thrilling force, followed by a torrent of arpeggios.

Like its companion piece, the 'Moonlight' sonata, the **Sonata in E flat Op. 27 No. 1** (1801) is subtitled 'Quasi una fantasia' ('in the manner of a fantasy'). The four movements are marked to be played immediately one after the other, without a break, giving the impression of a fantasy-like structure, and they are linked to each other in remarkable ways. Instead of opening in sonata form, as expected, Beethoven begins with a beguiling *Andante* rondo. Two main themes are heard twice, followed by a contrasting *cantabile* section, and a varied repetition of the opening material. Out of nowhere, an *Allegro* in C major bursts onto the scene, before the gentle opening material returns. Both the fast tempo and C tonality return in the scherzo that follows, but this time in the minor mode, filled with jumping broken chords. In its key, A flat major, the galloping middle section foreshadows the brief slow movement, which in turn may be regarded as an introduction to the finale, because it ends with a

cadenza passage that leads directly into the *Allegro vivace*. And it is in the middle of this long, experimental last movement – now, finally, in sonata form – that Beethoven suddenly pauses its strident *perpetuum mobile* character and gloriously returns to the theme of the slow movement, now in the home key of E flat. He ends, however, with a laugh, a brilliant *Presto* coda.

Beethoven favoured the key of A flat major for some of his most personal and expressive utterances, perhaps none more intimate than his penultimate sonata, the **Sonata in A flat Op. 110** (1821). The first movement is marked *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* ('at a moderate speed, in a singing style, very expressively'), to which Beethoven added *con amabilità* ('amiably') and *sanft* ('gently'); this is music to be treated with great care and tenderness. Opening with a soaring, songlike melody, it transitions (via shimmering broken chords) to a passionate surge of emotion in E flat, before moving to a darker hue, F minor, at the start of the brief development. When that soaring first melody returns, it is now accompanied by the shimmering arpeggios, and subsequently reaches poignantly towards D flat major, then to the remote E major, and finally back to A flat.

Charles Rosen describes the following scherzo as 'humorous, folksy, sometimes brutal, and even sardonic'. It is certainly strange, with an ambiguous rhythmic pulse that unsettles the listener. Some light relief is provided by Beethoven's fragmentary use of two popular Viennese songs, *Unsa Kätz häd Katz'In g'habt* ('Our cat has had kittens'), and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich* ('I am dissolute, you are dissolute'), along with a perilous trio section.

The last chord of the scherzo resolves into the first of the *Adagio ma non troppo*, in B flat minor, which begins with a mysterious operatic recitative that culminates in a series of expressive repeated notes. This gives way to a deeply painful *Arioso dolente*, (*Klagender Gesang*), its sorrowful melody supported by repeated chords, out of which emerges a solitary melody in the left hand that becomes the subject of a three-voice fugue. After climaxing, it drops a semitone to G minor to allow the return of the *Arioso dolente*, now broken and exhausted. But just when all seems lost, a strengthening series of G major chords anticipates a 'revival bit by bit' (*poi a poi di nuovo vivente – wieder auflebend*) as the fugue returns, now with the original subject inverted. Beethoven employs all manner of contrapuntal techniques that together create an overwhelming sense of returning to life, as the thundering bass subject returns to the home key. Far from being an academic exercise, the counterpoint is intrinsic to this piece's emotional drama, ultimately leading to an exultant coda. Even in his late period, it seems, the spirit of the heroic impulse burned in Beethoven as strongly as ever.

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